

“In the Days of Those Kings . . .”

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In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever (Dan. 2:44).

Daniel is prophesying to the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, that God will establish his kingdom (church) in the time of the fourth kingdom (Roman Empire). It will not be by accident, but by God’s providence that Rome will be a major world power that God will use to establish his kingdom. “. . . Daniel blessed the God of heaven: Daniel said, “Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, For wisdom and power belong to Him. It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to the wise men. . .” (Dan. 2:19-22).

To fully understand the political scene of the New Testament it would be beneficial to study the past political history of the New Testament (Inter-Testamental History). Neither time nor space will allow me to give a complete historical analysis of the political scene before the writing of the New Testament. It would be good for one to study the reign of Alexander the Great, Antiochus IV Epiphanes’ reign, the Maccabean Revolt, and the Hasmonean era.

The Seleucids, Ptolemies, Hasmoneans, Herods, and Caesars all made their contributions to the prologue of history that introduced the coming of Christ. It was in the Roman world that Jesus Christ lived and did his work, and it was during this world that the church began and flourished, and the apostles lived and wrote their letters. A study of the political background of the New Testament gives us a deeper appreciation for the New Testament and the men who penned it (under the influence of the Holy Spirit) and the people who lived by it. Hopefully, by this study, our faith will be deepened, and our knowledge of the scriptures widened.

The political arena that surrounded the life of Jesus and the apostles in the first century influenced their social status, their languages, their education, and to some extent, their religion.

The Roman Empire achieved what previous empires had attempted with only partial success — the welding of many nationalities and peoples into one unified whole. The Roman government

was able to maintain a more or less stable civil order for nearly half a millennium. The government was centered in Rome. The two principal authorities were the Emperor and the Senate. The Senate was made up of several hundred prominent leaders who had gained prestige, usually by their wealth. The Senate was supposed to serve as a check to the power of the Emperor. The Emperor had almost absolute authority. The secret of Rome's success, where others had failed, lay in her wise provision for differing kinds of local supervision and control. Rome did not superimpose a uniform government procedure upon its conquered territories. Rome allowed many localities to govern their own affairs as long as they did not violate Roman directives. These conquered areas were generally organized into provinces. These are mentioned in the New Testament: Bithynia (Acts 16:7), Cyprus (Acts 13:4), Judea (Gal. 1:22), and Spain (Rom. 15:24). The provinces were ruled in two different ways: Proconsuls, who were responsible to the Roman Senate, ruled over provinces better known as senatorial provinces. Secondly, there were governors, better known as Procurators or prefects. Procurators were assigned directly by the Emperor and held their offices only as long as the Emperor wanted them there. The proconsuls held their positions by annual appointment by the Senate.

Roman Emperors

Augustus (32 B.C.- A.D. 14). At the time of Jesus' birth Augustus Caesar was the Roman Emperor. He was part of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, 27 B.C.-A.D. 68. He transformed the administration of his Empire, establishing a peaceful environment and stability to the whole Roman world. He was responsible for the census roll taken before the birth of Christ. This decree forced Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem where Jesus was born (Luke 2:1-4).

Tiberius (A.D. 13-37). Before Augustus died in A.D. 14, he forced his stepson, Tiberius, into a marriage with his daughter, Julia. He then adopted Tiberius as his son and made it quite clear that he was to be his successor. In A.D. 13, the year before Augustus died, Tiberius was made emperor. Tiberius had a nervous breakdown and withdrew himself to the Island Capri. Tiberius died in 37. Tiberius was not directly involved in the life of Jesus, but his presence was felt (Matt. 22:17-21; Mark 12:14-17; Luke 3:1). When Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees and the Herodians about paying tribute, His reply was, "Render therefore unto Caesar (Tiberius) the things which are Caesar's . . ." (Matt. 22:21). When Jesus was before Pilate, the Jews falsely accused Christ of not paying tribute to Tiberius (Luke 23:2).

Caius Julius (37-41). Caius Julius is better known as Caligula. Caligula became Tiberius' successor. He was the great-nephew of Tiberius. He proclaimed himself a god and thus encouraged the idea of Emperor worship.

Claudius (41-54). After the death of Caligula, the Praetorian Guard stepped in as personal bodyguards to the emperor, and they forced the Senate to accept their choice of emperor. Claudius was not an obvious first choice for emperor. Handicapped as a child and left with a shaking head and a bad limp, he had always been treated with contempt by the imperial household. Much of Paul's journeys were during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28; 18:2). Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because of the uproar the Jews made under the leadership of Chrestus. Among those Jews were Aquilla and Priscilla.

Nero (54-68). Nero was only 16 when he became emperor. Nero was heavily influenced by his mother and by advisors, one of whom was Seneca, a Spanish philosopher. Nero did not want to be emperor but was manipulated in doing so by his mother. Nero arranged for the murder of his mother and his brother, which contributed to his emotional instability. When a fire devastated Rome in A.D. 64, Nero built an enormous palace in the ruins of the city. He blamed the fire on the Christians and arrested and murdered many of them. Paul and Peter were both killed by Nero. Paul exercised his rights as a Roman citizen and asked to be tried by Nero (Acts 25:9-12). Paul's appeal took him to Rome where he spent two years in Caesar's palace (Nero's palace, Acts 28:16-31). Nero committed suicide and the family of Augustus died with him.

Vespasian (69-79). After a year of civil strife that saw power change hands four times, the general Vespasian installed himself as emperor and inaugurated a short-lived dynasty (Flavian) which lasted from A.D. 69-138. During this time, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus lived and wrote his monumental work. In A.D. 70 Vespasian ordered his son Titus to destroy Jerusalem and plunder its temple.

Domitian (81-96). The next prominent Emperor who was significant to the writing of the New Testament was Domitian. Under the rule of Domitian, the relationship between the Senate and Emperor broke down completely. Domitian was far more interested in maintaining efficient administration than in trying to mollify the senatorial aristocracy. Under his rule, Emperor worship intensified, Christians were severely persecuted, and John the apostle lived and wrote the book of Revelation.

The Herodian Dynasty

It would be impossible to think of the political background of the New Testament without the mentioning of the Herodian clan. When Julius Caesar supplanted Pompey as Roman leader, Antipater was appointed Roman procurator of Judea and his son, Herod, became military governor of Galilee. Herod's success in this post led the Roman Senate to appoint him king of

Judea in 40 B.C. Herod was a ruthless person. He murdered anyone who dared to question or attempt to remove his authority. He killed his brother-in-law and three of his sons. He declared the decree that all male infants under two years of age should be killed. This forced Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Since several Herods appear in the New Testament, it is necessary to differentiate between them. In addition to Herod the Great, others so named are Antipas, who dealt with John the Baptist, who tried Jesus, and whom Jesus nicknamed "that fox" (Luke 13:32). Herod Agrippa I, was responsible for the beheading of James the son of Zebedee, and for Peter's imprisonment (Acts 12:1-2). Another Herodian, was Philip, better known as Herod-Philip (Mark 6:17). His reign was brief and little is known of him. Herod Agrippa II was the one Paul appealed to when he made his defense for his Christian belief. (Acts 21:17-40). With Agrippa II's death, the Herodian dynasty ended.

Roman Procurators

After the death of Agrippa I, Judea reverted to rule by assigned Procurators. During the period A.D. 6-41, there were seven procurators of Judea: Caponius, 6-9 A.D., Marcus Ambivius, 9-12; Annius Rufus, 12-15; Veler- ius Gratus, 15-26; Pontius Pilate, 26-36 who tried Jesus; Marcellus, 36-37 and Maryllus, 38-41. In the time of Paul, the Roman Procurators were Fadus, A.D. 44-46, Alexander 46-48, Cumanus, 48-52; Felix 52-59 and Festus 59-61. Paul, after his arrest, appealed to Felix (Acts 24:2-23) and Festus (Acts 24:24-26). Under these Procurators the Jews and Christians enjoyed a considerable amount of peace.

Conclusion

It is amazing how God used these ungodly political figures to further his cause to redeem mankind to himself. Either directly or indirectly these political figures helped establish our faith in the New Testament. The New Testament is not only God's will to govern our lives, but also a great historical record of the world's kingdoms that God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ established so he may establish his kingdom that will subdue all kingdoms.

". . . God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed . . ." (Dan. 2:44).